

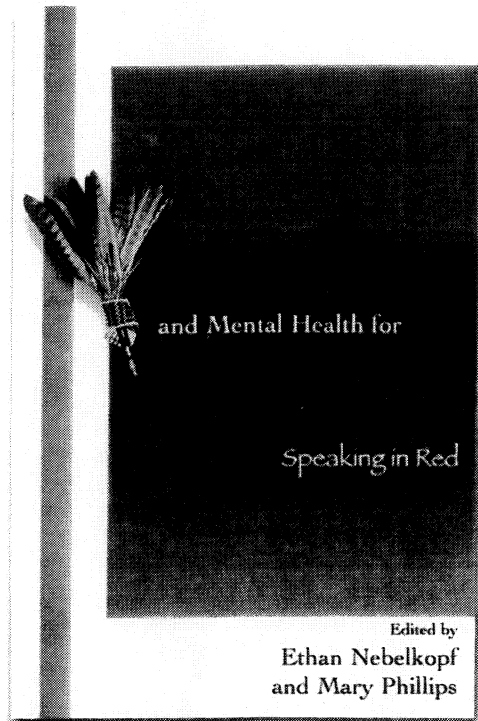
Holistic health revisited

© Indian Country Today November 08, 2004. All Rights Reserved

Posted: November 08, 2004

by: [Lucinda Rowlands](#) / Indian Country Today

[Click to Enlarge](#)



Medical book combines spiritual and physical well being

OAKLAND, Calif. - The prophecy of the return of the Morning God of the East in Diné cosmology tells of a time of worldwide destruction, apocalyptic death and plague. Is the Morning God dancing among us now?

The HIV/AIDS epidemic, sometimes called the "new small pox," has cavorted among the poor and disenfranchised for three decades. Disease and substance abuse have become the bane of minority populations in disproportionately large numbers. To many, AIDS is the prophesied destroyer.

High-tech medical professionals, with their finely tuned scientific minds, have been conditioned to disregard such antiquated folklore. But perhaps this is not the best way to provide treatment for non-Caucasian patients. What if doctors were trained to understand American Indian cultural systems? American Indians many times reject classic Western medicine in favor of traditional healing methods when they are made available.

This theory is investigated in "Healing and Mental Health for Native Americans: Speaking in Red" (AltaMira Press, 2004) which confronts disease and many other contemporary ills. "The Morning God Comes Dancing, Culturally Competent Mental Health and HIV Services," by Nelson Jim is just one of the works of the 36 professionals in the American Indian health care field which have been compiled and reprinted in this amalgamation of healing ideas.

The collection of articles explores the concept that there are logical ways of combining Western linear thinking with the circular patterns of American

Indian folk knowledge.

The introduction makes the bold statement: "Healing and Mental Health for Native Americans: Speaking in Red" offers insights into the problems encountered and solutions practiced by Native Americans today. This collection provides a nexus from tradition to innovation, restoring to health the pains of heart and mind."

Editor Ethan Nebelkopf is the director of the Native American Health Center's Family and Child Guidance Clinic (FCGC) which opened its doors to the Oakland/San Francisco community in 1989. Co-editor Mary Phillips, Omaha/Laguna Pueblo, works in program planning, community coordination and evaluation at United American Indian Involvement, Inc. in Los Angeles.

The book is geared toward medical professionals as well as the Native community.

In an interview with Indian Country Today Nebelkopf stated: "Jill Erickson, our project officer from the federal Center for Mental Health Services, one of our largest funding agencies, stressed the importance of documenting innovative mental health and substance abuse programs for Native people. She said that this type of book would benefit Native people on many levels."

The editors worked with a group of professionals from a wide range of specialties to bring renewed hope to people who have been ravaged by poverty and despair. Their articles bring into focus the devastating effects of incompetent health care systems and lack of funding. The aim is to heal wounds (physical as well as mental) through changes in the way the sick are treated - spiritually, traditionally, ceremonially and scientifically - in urban settings as well as rural ones.

Nebelkopf doesn't think extreme measures are necessary to make extreme improvements either: "One Native family with substance abuse and mental health problems was seen by a counselor for a year. A Native healer was brought in and met with the family and the counselor. "After praying and burning some cedar marked improvements took place," said Nebelkopf.

Nebelkopf also thinks that health care funding must be reorganized before improvements can become widespread. "The mainstream system of care has been designed around the needs of the funding agencies instead of the needs of the clients. Managed care does not recognize that effective services must acknowledge individual differences and cultural identities," he said in a press release.

"I think access to health care for not only American Indians, but all people of color can be improved. To overcome these disparities the health care system in the United States needs to be overhauled, taken out of the hands of the insurance

companies and into the hands of consumers and providers of health care."

The Native American Health Center is a non-profit community-based health care provider which opened in 1972 with four clinics in the bay area. Their mission statement is to assist American Indians and Alaska Natives to improve and maintain their physical, mental, emotional, social and spiritual well being with respect for cultural traditions and to advocate for the needs of all Indian people, especially the most vulnerable members of the community. The center takes a holistic approach to treating the "whole" person with emotional and spiritual guidance as well as medical and social services.

These Californian centers have dealt with the unique problems that were created by the 1950s relocation of Indian families from reservations to urban areas such as San Francisco. "All minorities in urban areas have huge problems with poverty, unemployment and health care.

"Native Americans are such a small minority that they are often invisible to funders. The unique status of urban Native Americans as belonging to sovereign nations is also overlooked," said Nebelkopf. "Even the small amount of federal funding for health care available to tribes is not available to urban Indian nonprofit organizations."

"Healing and Mental Health for Native Americans: Speaking in Red" is the 15th addition to "Contemporary Native American Communities, Stepping Stones to the Seventh Generation", a series of books examining life in contemporary communities from the viewpoint of Native values.

The Native American Health Center is located at 3124 International Blvd., Oakland, CA 94601; (510) 535-4440;

fax (510) 437-9574; www.nativehealth.org.

For more information about the book, visit www.altamirapress.com or write to AltaMira Press, 1630 North Main St., #367, Walnut Creek, CA 94596.

